

# Building Blocks

A PUBLICATION OF THE CALIFORNIA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMISSION SUMMER 2001

CALIFORNIA  
**CHILDREN  
& FAMILIES**  
COMMISSION



## A LETTER FROM ROB REINER

Chair, California Children and Families Commission

Dear Colleague,

Science, in recent years, has confirmed what many of us as parents and caregivers have known instinctively – the experiences of children in their earliest years have a profound effect on the way they grow and develop, and establish a foundation for future success, in school and in life. Researchers have shown that secure and loving attachments with parents and caregivers, and the right kind of developmental experiences, instill in children the social, emotional and cognitive abilities they need to thrive in school settings. We know, for example, that singing and reading to babies and young children encourages the development of early literacy skills.

Therefore, we must place a significant amount of focus and attention on the vital role that providing a healthy and nurturing environment during early childhood development plays in each child's school success. It is only by ensuring that early childhood development opportunities are woven through our various systems of services that we can truly hope to reform our education system. Many teachers worry that too many students reach

school without sufficient language and communication skills or emotional maturity levels that foster good learning. A recent national survey of 4,000 preschoolers found that

43 percent of 4-year-olds cannot consistently recognize letters in a book and that many are unable to play cooperatively or sit still long enough to learn in the classroom.

But we are moving in the right direction. Across the country and in California, there is a growing movement afoot – one that is embracing and recognizing the critical need to focus policy and resources on a comprehensive approach toward early childhood development, ultimately achieving school readiness

continued on page 14

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- A Letter from Rob Reiner, Chair 1
- CCFC's Vision for Our Youngest Californians Ready for School and for Life 2
- Partners and Programs for School Readiness 6
  - Major Media Campaign Gets the Readiness Message Out Statewide 7
  - New Tools for Families and Early Childhood Educators 8
- Bringing It All Together for the Long Haul Collaborative Program Development and Long-Range Planning 10
- California Snapshot 11
- County Commissions Launch Innovative School Readiness Initiatives 12
- Prop. 10 - Facts at a Glance 13



# CCFC's Vision for Our Youngest Californians

## READY FOR SCHOOL AND FOR LIFE

*This article is the first in a series exploring important themes in the development of young children in California and discussing how public and private organizations can work together more effectively to help young children succeed. To establish a unifying framework for these discussions, in this first issue we highlight the California Children and Families Commission's over-arching objective: that all young children reach age 5 healthy, learning, and ready to achieve their greatest potential in school.*

*We hope this series will promote an ongoing dialogue on school readiness among policymakers, managers, advocates, and the general public for the benefit of all young children and their families.*

Every year in California, over half a million children come into the world. Born into a multitude of different cultures, language groups, and communities, they begin life in every kind of family configuration and economic circumstance. In 2001, nearly two-thirds of these children will be ethnic minorities; almost half will be Latino.<sup>1</sup>

Many of our youngest Californians come into the world healthy and will go on to receive all the nurturing and stimulation they need to grow well and meet their potential. Too many others, however, arrive in kindergarten five years later already disadvantaged by an early life of poverty, poor health care, and emotional and mental deprivation.

Prop. 10 devotes significant new

resources to the care and support of young children and their families during these crucially important early years so that no child will be left behind. Parents, early childhood development educators, health and social service professionals, policymakers, and many other individuals and organizations play an indispensable role in this process. To be effective, however, all the players need to pull strategically in the same direction. To organize and focus our work more powerfully around a common goal, the California Children and Families Commission (CCFC, or "State Commission") has adopted a single over-arching criterion by which to judge our collective success:

**All young children healthy, learning, and ready to succeed in school.**

Why does "school readiness" matter? From before birth, every young child is on a developmental journey through many



stages that build on previous learning and growth. One of the most significant milestones on that journey comes at around age 5, when the child enters kindergarten.

From the child's point of view, going to school means leaving home and parents or other familiar people to join many other children in a strange new environment with unfamiliar expectations. While this transition is much less dramatic for children who have attended preschool, all kids entering the K-12 system for the first time are asked to focus on learning in a new way and are faced with the beginning of expectations to perform. The skills and confidence they gain in their first year set the stage for later school success, which, in turn, has a powerful effect on their chances in adult life. And early performance matters more than it used to: as California's public schools focus on accountability and achievement, more is being asked of young learners, and earlier, than ever before. According to

Redding, Calif., kindergarten teacher Jill Hauser, of Rother Elementary School, "The kindergarten class of 2001 is a literacy laboratory. It's not the same as when today's parents were in school. Basically, according to state standards, by the end of the kindergarten year kids should be decoding, i.e., using phonics skills to read text. If you work backward from that, there's a lot that has to happen first."

While today's kindergarten

puts a premium on cognitive and language skills, the child's

ability to master those skills depends on a strong foundation of readiness in other domains.

In addition to being physically healthy, rested, and

well-nourished, the ready child should have mastered gross motor skills like pedaling a tricycle or climbing stairs without holding on to the railing, as well as small motor skills like fastening buttons or manipulating two small objects at the same time, as in stringing beads. He or she understands two-step sequential requests such as "Please pick up the ball and then get your coat," and learns and uses new vocabulary in everyday experiences. He can express his feelings appropriately, is able to form and sustain social relationships, and demonstrates empathy—the ability to see things from another person's point of view. In addition, he or she is excited about learning, and has begun to learn about literacy and mathematics at home and/or in preschool through stories, print, and numbers and counting.

#### When does readiness start?

The beginnings of a child's readiness for school lie in the health and nutrition of the mother even before the child is conceived. From there, readiness develops continuously through a healthy pregnancy and birth, through infancy and toddlerhood up until the moment of school enrollment. Ideally, this is a multidimensional process in which the family and/or other caregivers offer the young child physical, cognitive, language, and social and emotional experiences that meet and gently extend his growing potential. Within the process as a whole, there are optimal times when the child is most ready to learn different skills—to walk, to speak, and so on.

At the core of all readiness is healthy brain development. Researchers tell us that the newborn baby has most of the brain cells he or she will ever have, but the connections between cells (synapses) that wire the brain, giving it its shape and power, are largely unformed. How these cells will connect and communicate with each other depends on environmental stimuli. Provided the baby is

unharmful by prenatal smoking, substance abuse, or malnourishment, the infant brain grows from about 50 trillion synapses at birth to 1,000 trillion synapses at eight months, and keeps growing rapidly in response to the environment and

experiences until the child is about 3 years old. The brain of a healthy 3-year-old child is twice as active as an adult's. In order for these new connections to remain stable, however, they must be reinforced through repeated exposure to touch, sound, sights, language, and other stimuli. The child must also be protected from

stressful experiences, such as physical abuse and exposure to violence, that generate abnormal levels of neurotransmitters that can distort or limit brain growth.<sup>2</sup>

#### What helps kids to be ready? What hurts?

As the brain research suggests, readiness is a two-way street that asks more of us than simply to protect children from overt damage during the crucial first years of life. For their health and development, young human beings depend on a rich interaction with adults who have the resources and knowledge to give them steady positive support and to offer them stimulating experiences at the right moment—not too early, and not too late.

A good deal is also known about which factors at home or in the community tend to promote or prevent readiness. At home, the research shows that children's attainment is helped most when parents can draw on their own education to teach their children and when family income is sufficient not only for children's basic needs but for other opportunities and experiences that encourage fuller development.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, children suffer and show behavioral problems when they are faced with aggressive parental behaviors, lack of maternal warmth, and stressful life events. Living with community violence also has damaging effects. Low birthweight, preterm infants are especially at risk for poor health and develop-

**From before birth, every young child is on a developmental journey through many stages that build on previous learning and growth.**



**B**y the end of the kindergarten year kids should be decoding, i.e., using phonics skills to read text. If you work backward from that, there's a lot that has to happen first.

**T**o start with, kids need to be able to leave parents and be away from them for several hours a day. They need to be able to focus. Working with other kids, they need to be able to share material, take turns, and handle disappointments by using their language skills instead of having a meltdown. It's great when kids come in having heard stories read aloud and having a sense of what letters and numbers are all about.

**T**he kids who have this kind of foundation are curious and eager, ready to take in everything. They want to hear all about acorns or bugs or whatever the kindergarten curriculum has to offer....

**W**ith some kids, all I have to do is give them the strategies to read, and they're off. For children who've never been read to or who come in without knowing how to use a pencil, learning about literacy can be a struggle.

*Jill Hauser  
Kindergarten Teacher  
Rother Elementary School, Redding*

#### CCFC'S VISION . . . continued from page 3

mental outcomes, including a higher incidence of physical disorders such as cerebral palsy, congenital abnormalities, or seizure disorders.<sup>4</sup> All of these risks are greater for families who are poor, though not every poor family experiences them, and poverty by itself does not condemn children to failure. Families with lower income or education levels can and do care for their children well. Nonetheless, the 26 percent of California children who live in poverty face significantly greater challenges.<sup>5</sup>

For children who may be at risk of falling behind, a number of programs whose principles are consistent with what we know about early brain development have been shown to be effective. Programs that help parents become well-informed teachers for their children significantly improve children's intellectual and language abilities and school readiness. High quality child care and early intervention for young children can reduce the need for special education, improve children's language and math skills in elementary school, and generate lasting benefits that produce cost savings in special education, welfare, and juvenile crime. Several studies have shown that certain well-designed home visiting programs for parents and their infants can help to improve birthweights and to reduce premature deliveries and child abuse.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, such programs are provided through a family support structure that is linked directly to neighborhood schools, providing families with easily accessible services tailored to their unique cultures, languages, and needs.

#### **How can we work together for school readiness?**

In any effort to help young children be ready for school, parents and caregivers themselves play the most important role. To be effective, they need the backing of all the public systems that share responsibility for young children—child care and child development, maternal and child health, social services, and other agencies, at both the state and county level.

But no single system can do this job by working alone. Because readiness spans so many areas, it requires parents, individual providers, and public systems to undertake a new collaborative agenda, aligning and integrating their ongoing work while building on existing school-linked and community initiatives that reach families of young children. Central to this agenda are new approaches that reflect and respond to the enormous diversity of California's children and families with respect to language, culture, family composition, physical difference, and other characteristics. To help the many California families who are not

reached by any publicly funded service, and to promote a statewide climate of understanding and commitment to meeting young children's developmental needs, public outreach and education are also essential.

Over time, our success on behalf of young children also depends on well-targeted research and an effective legislative agenda. Ultimately, the California Children and Families Commission envisions a complete continuum of care and education for young children, starting from before birth and continuing to and through schools that are well prepared to receive and teach the children who come to them. (The "Building Blocks for School Readiness" graphic below offers a useful three-part scheme about family/community and school roles in this process.) The Commission's current work with the Legislative Joint Committee to

develop a Master Plan for Education (pre-kindergarten through university) is an important part of this effort.

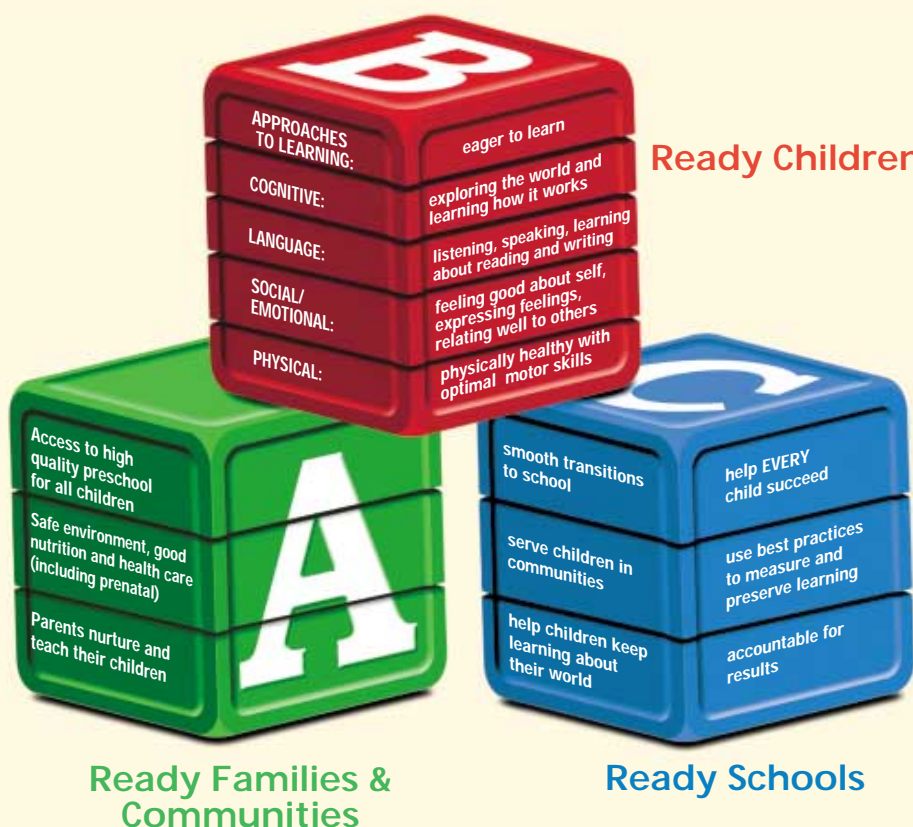
### A beginning, with more to come...

The articles on pp. 6-12 describe a range of school readiness programs and policy initiatives already underway at the state and county level within the school readiness framework. But ensuring that all our youngest children get everything they need to meet their potential in later life is an ambitious goal that requires partners at every level to delve into and address many complex issues. Future articles in this space will look more closely at some of these topics. By learning and working together, the Commission hopes that we can secure the future of today's young Californians, and those of tomorrow, not only for their sake but for the future of our whole society. ■

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- 2 Illig, D.C., Ph.D. (1998). Birth to Kindergarten: The Importance of the Early Years. Sacramento: California Research Bureau, California State Library, pp. 8-9.
- 3 Love, J.M., Aber, L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1994). Strategies for Assessing Community Progress Toward Achieving the First National Educational Goal. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., p. 29.
- 4 Child Trends. (2000). School Readiness: Helping Communities Get Children Ready for School and Schools Ready for Children. Child Trends Research Brief.
- 5 Burr, E., & Fuller, B. (2000). Early Education and Family Poverty. Crucial Issues in California Education 2000: Are the Reform Pieces Fitting Together? Policy Analysis for California Education, pp. 9-20.
- 6 Illig 12-14.

## Building Blocks for School Readiness

*Adapted from the National Education Goals Panel*



# Partners and Programs for School Readiness

## CCFC SUPPORTS NEW STATEWIDE INITIATIVES WITH PROP. 10 FUNDS

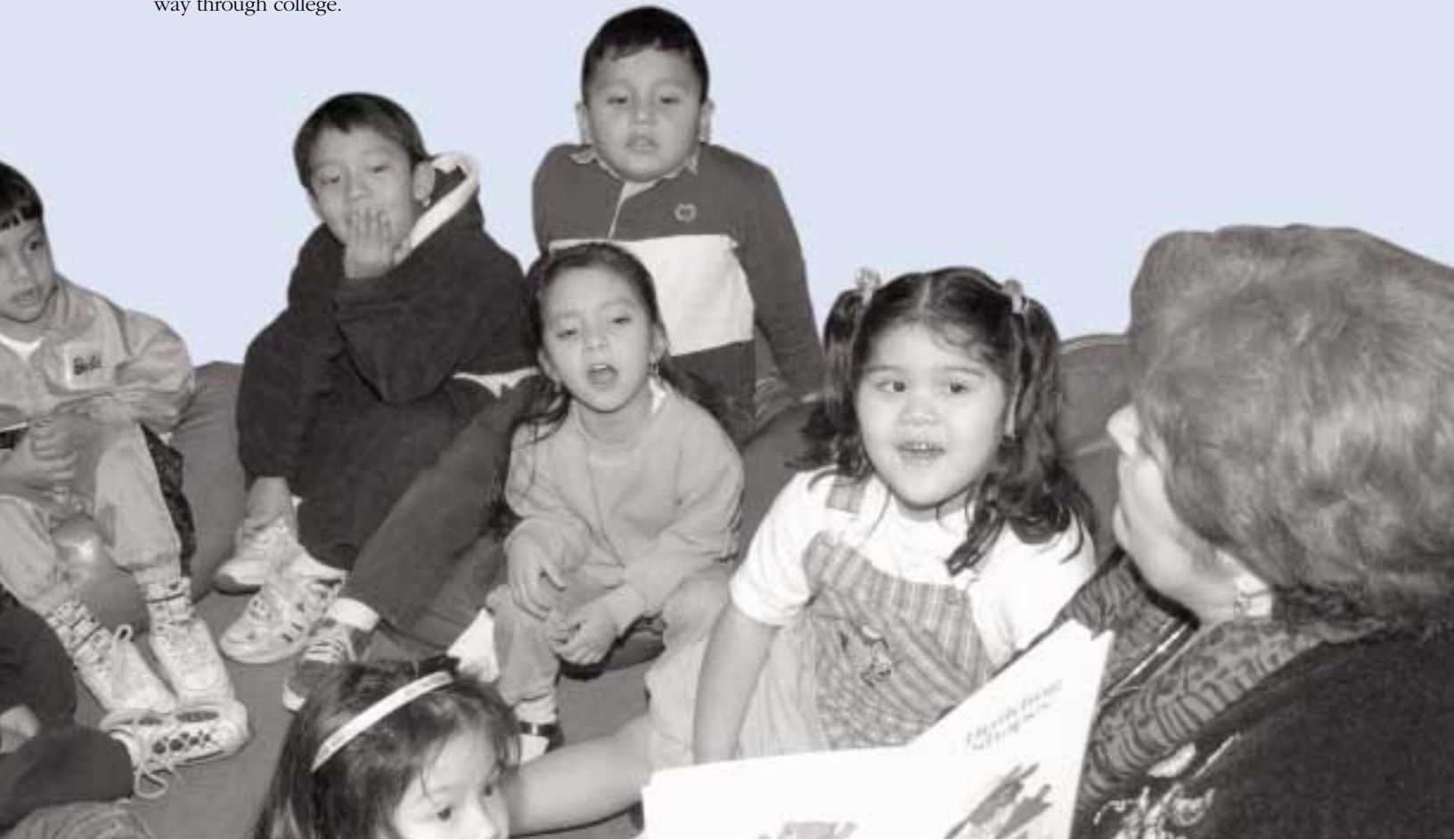
The California Children and Families Commission (CCFC, or “State Commission”) is working with other state agencies and local partners to support several important new statewide initiatives that work together to build school readiness by expanding valuable existing programs, creating new ones to fill gaps, and targeting those families and communities who are farthest away from basic resources and need the most help.

In allocating its Prop. 10 resources to these programs and others that improve young children’s readiness for school, the State Commission is guided by a framework of five strategic objectives:

- (1) increasing public awareness of school readiness issues,
- (2) improving the state’s systemic capacity to support high-quality programs,
- (3) creating innovative partnerships, demonstrations, and pilot programs for study and replication,
- (4) conducting research and evaluation to find out what works, and
- (5) providing state-level policy leadership in comprehensive long-range planning for young children, from before birth to and through school and all the way through college.

In this first issue of *Building Blocks*, we highlight programs supporting parent education, early literacy and child care. As discussed in “CCFC’s Vision for Our Youngest Californians,” however, we know from brain research all development in young children is part of a multidimensional and interdependent process in which positive physical, emotional, social, and intellectual experiences all work together. And the developmental process as a whole builds on a foundation of physical and emotional health, good nutrition, and safety. Accordingly, the State Commission is also working closely with state partners in health, mental health, and social services through a variety of initiatives addressing these aspects of readiness.

The state-level initiatives described in the following pages are examples of projects intended to support and complement the essential work of Prop. 10 at the local level. To see a listing of other State Commission initiatives, please refer to our web site at [www.ccfc.ca.gov](http://www.ccfc.ca.gov). For a look at how County Commissions are also implementing their own strategic initiatives for school readiness, please see the description of innovative programs in Orange, Ventura, and Monterey counties on pp. 12.



# Major Media Campaign Gets the Readiness Message Out Statewide

PUBLIC EDUCATION PLAYS KEY ROLE IN CCFC STRATEGY



Recognizing the need for increased awareness about emerging science identifying the importance of the early years and the central role of parents and caregivers in child development, the authors of Prop. 10 designated six percent of funds for the State Commission to support mass media communication. In 2000, a comprehensive multi-ethnic and multi-faceted public education campaign reached millions of Californians with awareness-based messages.

Television spots such as “Cradle Me,” with children asking their parents to cradle them in the first years of life, and print and outdoor media including “You are Your Child’s First Teacher” and “The First Years of Learning Last a Lifetime,” focused on the critical early years for children and the importance of positive interaction with adults. These paid media efforts, together with public and community outreach efforts, have contributed to a dramatic increase in public awareness.

In 1997, 54 percent of Californians surveyed identified birth to age 3 as the time during which the greatest amount of brain development occurs. By 2000, a survey by the California Center for Health Improvement revealed that over three-quarters of Californians were aware those years

are the critical ones for brain development. CCFC’s media campaign ultimately will move from raising awareness and understanding to encouraging specific positive nurturing behaviors by parents, and linking parents and caregivers to available support services and resources. This process has already begun. Using a mix of media—including television, radio, outdoor billboards and print—ads over the past year have run in multiple languages and included the launch of an (800) KIDS-025 resource number for additional information.

Parents who call the toll free number receive information, tools and resources covering a wide range of important health and developmental topics, including proper nutrition, child safety, the selection of quality child care and the need to protect children from the dangers of secondhand smoke. These materials are available in English and Spanish and several Asian languages.

Complementing the paid media effort, the public outreach component has been far-reaching, yet very targeted, given the diverse communities that comprise the state. A part-

nership with Univision, the top Spanish-language network in California, has produced more than 30 Spanish-language informational segments for parents. A bi-monthly newsletter for African American families has been distributed through African American newspapers statewide. And a library partnership has made in-language, culturally relevant material available in Asian American neighborhoods.

In recent months, CCFC has awarded new, three-year paid media and public relations contracts that will provide for a major expansion of its comprehensive media campaign. The launch of the new paid media program is planned for the summer.

The next phase of public relations will include an extensive, locally focused outreach effort through community-based organizations (CBOs). Since many harder-to-reach audiences rely heavily on local, non-media sources for their information, a number of CBOs statewide will be enlisted to conduct tailored, customized public education efforts in their communities. This grassroots level outreach will allow the campaign to further broaden its reach and assure that all Californians—

regardless of economic status—have the opportunity to benefit from information that can help ensure all our children reach school healthy, learning and ready to succeed.

Californians identifying birth to age 3 as the time when the greatest amount of brain development occurs

54%  
in  
1997

76%  
in  
2000



# New Tools for Families and Early Childhood Educators

*While public education is essential in raising general awareness and helping to create a climate for change in California, it is only one part of the State Commission's comprehensive approach. Prop. 10 has also funded several major initiatives to put new readiness-building tools and skills directly into the hands of the people closest to young children every day—their families and teachers—and to support them as they learn and practice new approaches.*

## Kit Helps Parents Care for the New Baby

*CCFC to Implement Major Statewide Initiative to Help Support New Families*

Research over the past 20 years has increasingly documented the critical importance of parenting and its role in determining a child's long-term outcomes, especially during children's early years. While there is a wealth of information about how to have a healthy pregnancy and how to help children grow up physically, mentally and emotionally ready for school, there is still much to do to translate this knowledge into action. Although breastfeeding con-

information via multiple mediums has been in development over the past year. Distribution of the Kit for New Parents to California's 500,000 new and expecting parents, representing one of the most far-reaching grassroots public education efforts to provide parents and caregivers with comprehensive child development information, will begin fall 2001.

The Kit—initially available in English and Spanish—has been designed to introduce parents to important child development topics, as well as to refer parents to helpful resources and additional information. It contains videos produced by the I Am Your Child Foundation on important themes on the early years, brochures about pregnancy, parenting and health, an easy-to-use *Parents Guide* developed by the University of California at Berkeley that lists relevant resources and organizations, and an illustrated book appropriate for young children.

In order to ensure the widespread implementation and distribution of the Kit would be effective and well-received, the State Commission engaged in a three-month pilot program to test:

- The Kits' effectiveness;
- Recipients' response to the content of the Kit;
- Effective distribution methods.

The pilot test was conducted in collaboration with Santa Clara, Alameda, Modoc and Lassen Children and Families Commissions. The County Commissions coordinated local distribution via hospitals and prenatal and home visitation programs. In addition, through a partnership with the Public Health Foundation in Los Angeles County, a Women, Infants and Children program distributed Kits to their clients.

The State Commission contracted with the University of California at Berkeley School of Public Health to conduct a study of the pilot program. Released in February 2001, the results revealed overwhelmingly positive reactions to the Kit. In a follow-up survey conducted six weeks after being given the Kit, parents showed significant increases in knowledge of their young children's needs and where to go for help.

Nearly half reported that they thought or behaved differently because of the Kit, particularly in the areas of child development, child nutrition, sleep and safety issues and caring for themselves. Use of the Kit was extremely high among both English- (89 percent) and Spanish-speaking women (95 percent) and three-fourths of respondents intended to use the Kit in the future. Virtually all felt that it should be given to every new parent.

Information culled from the study—along with recommendations provided by CCFC's Advisory Committee on Diversity, County Commissions, the California Children and Families Association, service providers and child development experts regarding the Kit's contents—has provided valuable insight and became the basis for program implementation plans in communities across the state.

Based on results from the pilot test, the State Commission implementation plan is primarily focused on a partnership with County Commissions for the implementation and distribution of the Kit statewide. County Commissions know the unique needs of their communities and have the local knowledge needed to determine the most effective partnerships with service providers and community-based organizations that serve new parents. In addition, the State Commission is exploring partnership opportunities with statewide programs that serve this population.

This publication will provide updates on the Kit for New Parents, as the State Commission further develops and refines the implementation and distribution.

## Reading Institutes and Distance Learning Help Thousands Teach Literacy

In order for young children to arrive in kindergarten ready to learn to read, their parents and preschool teachers need specific knowledge of how to create the developmentally and culturally appropriate experiences and environments that will help children succeed. For schools to be ready to receive and teach the young children coming to them, good advance com-

A new mother reviews the CCFC's Kit for New Parents with a service provider.



fers lifelong benefits on children, only 64 percent of California mothers breastfeed their babies. Immunization is crucial to children's health, but California still ranks 40th among states in coverage. Too many parents lack critical information about their child's healthy development and how to find available services.

In the State Commission's ongoing efforts to provide parents with critical child development information in order to affect a positive change in behavior and help more children enter school ready to succeed, a comprehensive information/educational kit containing vital parenting



munication between schools and preschoolers' parents and teachers is also essential. These linkages are especially important for those children with limited English or with cognitive, language, or hearing impairments, or those whose parents have a history of reading problems.

To meet these needs, the State Commission, the Governor's office, the University of California, California State University, the California Community



Satellites bring expert instruction on early literacy to child care providers at Brooklyn Children's Center in Los Angeles.

Colleges, and the California Association of Educators of Young Children (CAEYC) have joined their resources and expertise in a historic collaboration to bring professional development in reading instruction to thousands of early childhood educators and parents statewide.

An expansion of the Governor's Reading Initiative ("Every child a reader by 9!"), Early Steps to Reading Success is one of the first statewide efforts to involve early childhood educators in working as team members with K-primary teachers. Funded by \$15 million from the State Commission, the program extends the summer Reading Professional Development Institutes, previously aimed at kindergarten and above, to include 16,000 teachers of 4-year-olds in state-funded preschools that feed into low-performing schools. It is designed to build and sustain a network of pre-kindergarten and K-3 professional development programs with a strong parent involvement and parent education component. Nine hundred preschool teachers have already participated.

A second component of the program is an interactive distance learning course developed by the National Head Start Association and coordinated by the CAEYC called *HeadsUp! Reading*. A 21-week course focusing on gateways to literacy, the

program is designed for parents and teachers who work with children from birth to age 5, with priority given to those serving children at the greatest risk of school failure. It is also included in the follow-up for teachers of 4-year-olds who have participated in Early Steps to Reading Success. Nationally known experts head the course faculty, with frequent guest faculty addressing specific course topics.

*HeadsUp! Reading* has been delivered through more than 200 satellites in child care centers, preschools, community and four-year colleges, county offices of education and other sites across the state, with delivery to a total of 500 satellites planned. Launched in California on January 10, in its first year the program will reach 4,000 teachers and parents, providing stipends, instructional materials, and early childhood books. Future expansion of the program will include simultaneous translation of the course into Spanish and translation of program materials.

### Traveling Libraries

*Mobile Learning Labs Bring Books and Reading to Families*

As the Kit for New Parents and other efforts emphasize, early literacy is an essential aspect of school readiness. By making books freely available to families, libraries provide essential resources for the development of language and literacy in young children. But not all California families have had easy access to a library, and some may be unfamiliar with libraries and how to use them, or with reading itself.

To help remedy this situation, the State Commission is collaborating with the California State Library to support an addition to its Families for Literacy program. In a demonstration with the potential for replication across the state, the Library's new Mobile Learning Lab program has received \$2.1 million in Prop. 10 funds for local public libraries in 11 counties to buy custom-made vans that can extend the literacy programs found in public libraries to families living in underserved or remote areas. Large vans, uniquely designed and named by local community members, offer books, story time, language development activities

such as puppet shows, and access to computers to families who would not otherwise have them. On-board educators help parents learn about teaching and reading to their children at home, and some local partnerships send other help as well, such as nurses to talk about nutrition, or food distribution through the local food bank. The State Library has funded the development of prototypes, consulting, travel costs for training, and supplies for the program.

### Provider Retention Project

*Working to Keep Early Childhood Educators in the Profession and Growing*

For children in preschool, the early childhood educators who teach and care for them have a greater influence on their developing readiness than anyone else outside the family. Studies have found, however, that only one in seven child development centers offers the quality of programming known to effectively promote healthy development and learning, largely because salaries are so low that it is difficult to keep trained teachers on staff. With average annual earnings in 1998 of only \$15,000, early childhood educators leave the field at rates of 30 to 40 percent per year, with the highest turnover among the most skilled people.

Together with others in the child development community, the State Commission recognizes that the systemic problem of turnover can undermine our investments in training programs like Early Steps to Reading Success/*HeadsUp! Reading*. To protect these investments, the State Commission has launched a search for new methods of compensation that will make it more affordable and attractive for trained early childhood educators to remain and grow in the profession. The new Matching Funds for Retention Incentives for Early Care and Education Providers project, developed in collaboration with the Child Development Division of the California Department of Education and County Commissions, is a three-year matching program that invites each County Commission to devise ways of improving retention by increasing compensation for early childhood educators, offering them stipends, respite time, benefit packages, and bonuses. The State Commission will provide matching funds for these efforts at up to 50 percent for counties with smaller populations and up to 25 percent for those with larger populations. The effectiveness of the project will be evaluated by UC Berkeley's Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). In the first round of matching awards just completed, nearly \$4 million was awarded to 14 counties. ■



San Diego's "Words on Wheels" van, one of 11 mobile learning labs funded statewide, was unveiled in May.



# Bringing It All Together for the Long Haul

## COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND LONG-RANGE PLANNING

*In order to integrate and sustain all of these efforts for school readiness, the California Children and Families Commission (CCFC, or "State Commission"), the Governor, the Legislature, and key state agency partners have begun to create a state-level policy and resource framework that will support new models of comprehensive service delivery for families of young children in neighborhoods across California. In addition, legislative master planners for education are now beginning their consideration of California's long-range educational needs by starting with the needs of our youngest children, laying the foundation for a truly seamless system of pre-k through university education in California.*

### Governor's School Readiness Task Force Working on School Readiness Centers and Assessment Tools

To address the fact that many of our young children are entering kindergarten unprepared, in January of this year the Governor appointed a new School Readiness Task Force, co-chaired by Secretary of Education Kerry Mazzoni and State Commission Chair Rob Reiner. The Task Force is charged with developing models of school readiness preparation that can address the full spectrum of young child, family, and community needs, as well as schools' readiness to receive and work with kindergartners. In recent work the Task Force has designed a model comprehensive program of education and support for young children, to be implemented at the neighborhood level, that can create the environment, learning experiences and services that children need before entering kindergarten.

As currently envisioned, the School Readiness Centers/Programs would be implemented through grants to County Commissions. Located in family-friendly environments at or near schools, funded sites would provide high-quality child care, health and social services, and parent education and support. School outreach to families of pre-kindergartners would also be a required component, including communication of standards and expectations for kindergartners. Grants would target low-performing schools, as measured by performance on the Academic Performance Index (schools at or below the 30th percentile) and the STAR reading test (2nd graders at or below the 25th percentile). Sites would be expected to build on existing programs and collaborations that already integrate a similar array of partners and serv-

ices for children and families, such as Early Head Start, Even Start, Healthy Start, state preschool, and others. The model would also include the use of periodic school readiness assessments, one designed for individual children and one for the schools they attend.

The Task Force estimates that 1,350 schools serving 780,000 children would meet the proposed low-performing schools test. The State Commission has set aside \$225 million to launch the initiative over several years, with matching funds to be supplied by County Commissions.

### Joint Legislative Master Plan for K-University Education to Include Early Childhood Readiness Component

Building on the understanding that the roots of success for students at any level are in the earliest years, the Legislature is now expanding its new Master Plan for Education to include an analysis of the conditions and needs of the youngest Californians. The Master Plan, which will forecast needs and address issues at all levels of education in California from pre-kindergarten through university over the next 20 years, will include a comprehensive set of recommendations on the full spectrum of issues in early childhood development.

At the request of the Joint Legislative Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education, a School Readiness Working Group has been called together by the State Commission to join six other working groups in formulating the Master Plan. Comprised of a diverse group of experts, the school readiness group is chaired by State

continued on page 11

Commissioner Dr. Karen Hill-Scott, a nationally known expert in child care and development and professor at the UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research. Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan, professor at the Yale Child Study Center and at the Teachers College, Columbia University, and a well-known authority in early childhood education, is guiding and advising the group as its principal consultant.

In an effort that is the first of its kind nationally, the working group will take a comprehensive look at the preparation of young children in the various settings where children grow up, starting from earliest life and following children into the primary grades, with an eye to their chances for success beyond high school. As part of that investigation, the group will focus in particular on articulation: how well children make the physical, social, and intellectual transition from pre-kindergarten into kindergarten and from one grade level to another. In order to get the best understanding of these transitions, the work group has defined its population for study as children from prenatal to 8 years old. Among other things, its research agenda includes a Household Survey on Child Care and Preschool Access, intended to reach 15,000 respondents, that will provide infor-

mation on California families' child care/preschool needs according to where families live, their ethnicity, and their children's special needs. The survey will also address informal care. A second Public Opinion and Community Leader Survey will assess public understanding and opinion in regard to early child care and education among families with young children, the general public, and influential leaders in government, business, the nonprofit sector, and the faith community.

The working group's report to the Joint Legislative Committee will include an array of short- and long-range policy recommendations for incorporation into the Master Plan addressing governance and jurisdiction among public agencies that serve young children, the adoption of standards and assessments, professional development for those who work with young children, infrastructure, community involvement, and other matters. To ensure that the final Master Plan is fully aligned in its recommendations, the school readiness group is working in close collaboration with the six other groups charged with developing components on similar concerns that span the K-12, community colleges, California State University, and University of California systems. The school readiness

work group will submit its report to the Committee by January of next year. The Master Plan will be completed in its entirety by November 2002 and then submitted to the full Legislature, along with an agenda for specific legislation to put its recommendations into effect.

### Making a Difference

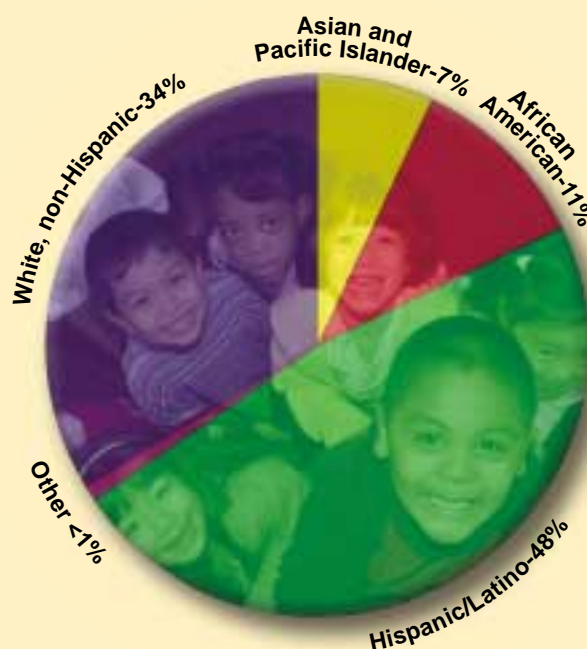
Taken together, these and other state and local efforts now underway under the California Children and Families Act have the potential to reach and benefit nearly all of California's young children, with corresponding benefits to the wider society. As families and early childhood educators gain the knowledge and tools they need to care for young children well, and as systems and policies are redesigned to support children's healthy growth and learning all the way into adulthood, we should see signs of success across a wide range of measures telling us that our young children are coming to school ready for the challenge in the classroom and that they are continuing on to success in later life. As evaluation findings become available, *Building Blocks* will report on the progress and results of our continuing work together. ■

## California Snapshot

**M**ore than half a million children are born every year in California, and approximately two-thirds of these births are non-White

(approximately 342,000 non-White children in 1998).

(July 1998, California Department of Finance)



### ETHNIC BREAKDOWN OF CALIFORNIA CHILDREN BIRTH TO 4 YEARS OLD

(California Department of Education, estimate for 2000)

**T**here are nearly 3.5 million children under age 5 in California.





# County Commissions Launch Innovative School Readiness Initiatives

*At the local level, the most effective programs are created by those who are closest to children and families in their own diverse communities and who understand their needs. With their share of Prop. 10 resources (80 percent of all funds statewide), County Children and Families Commissions around the state are now making significant investments in innovative local readiness initiatives tailored to local communities and designed to get results. Below are highlights of three County Commissions' comprehensive approaches.*

## **New School Readiness Coordinators Promote Kindergarten Success Throughout Orange County**

In Orange County, the Children and Families Commission, the County Department of Education, and the school districts serving the kindergarten population throughout the county have entered into a formal collaboration to create systems that will ensure that young children enter kindergarten ready for success and that they continue to do well throughout their school careers.

Under the Commission's School Readiness Initiative, newly-hired full-time District School Readiness Coordinators, supported by \$1.9 million in Prop. 10 funds, are creating partnerships and linkages in each of 24 participating school districts to address all the dimensions of readiness that lead up to success in kindergarten and beyond.

The coordinators (up to two full-time positions in each district) have begun bringing schools together with a wide range of providers and community participants, including child care providers, United Way, the Women, Infants and Children program, health providers, and others, to exchange information, to align services around common goals, and to begin a dialogue on the development of common measures of readiness. Coordinators are also surveying and talking with preschool teachers, kindergarten through third grade teachers and parents for their ideas on what would help children successfully transition into kindergarten.

Based on these and other findings, coordinators will work with parents and providers to propose systemic solutions for improved collaboration between child care providers and the schools, better opportunities for parent education and

parent involvement, and more accessible and appropriate services for young children and their families throughout each of their districts and the communities they serve.

The countywide agenda for school readiness, spearheaded by the Children and Families Commission of Orange County, includes the development and adoption of assessments and tools for identifying the quality of care in early childhood education

**D**istrict School Readiness Coordinators in each school district create partnerships and linkages to address all the dimensions of school readiness.

programs throughout the county, common measures of readiness across districts, and standardized assessments that can gauge children's performance all the way through school. District School Readiness Coordinators meet regularly to discuss their progress and to develop countywide policies and tools. The Initiative also supports the coordinators with technical assistance.

For more information about the Orange County Children and Families Commission School Readiness Program, please contact Jennifer Burrell via e-mail at [theburrells@prodigy.net](mailto:theburrells@prodigy.net).

## **Diverse "Neighborhoods for Learning" Help Young Children and Families Get Ready for School in Ventura County**

The centerpiece of the Ventura County Children and Families First Commission's plan for school readiness is its Neighborhoods for Learning (NfL) initiative, to which the Commission has com-

mitted the majority of its Prop. 10 funds. Recognizing that a "one size fits all" approach would not suit the unique and disparate needs of urban, suburban, and rural communities in a county with significant concentrations of Spanish speakers and migrant farm workers, the Commission has divided the county into seven geographical regions and apportioned \$8 million among them according to the number of children in each region under age 5, income levels, and school readiness indicators. Through an RFA (Request for Application) process, the Commission has invited community members in each of the regions to design the model that will best meet their needs.

According to Dr. Charles Weis, Chair of the Commission, the Commission is looking to partner with communities and neighborhoods in transforming fragmented and underfunded early childhood developmental services and supports into a comprehensive system. Each Neighborhood for Learning must adhere to certain guidelines intended to promote neighborhoods in which high-quality preschool, healthy starts for children, parent empowerment, family-friendly workplaces, and connections across generations are an integral part of a child's environment. At the same time, each Neighborhood for Learning will reflect the values and diversity of the community in which it operates and will have a strong parent component that involves parents not just as consumers, but also as policy-makers and providers.

To guide and assess the work, the County Commission has identified the following school readiness performance indicators:

- Increasing young children's participation in high-quality early care and development programs that achieve school readiness
- Decreasing the percentage of children referred to special education and programs for children with special needs
- Increasing school attendance
- Increasing the number of children ready to enter kindergarten
- Increasing participation in parental support programs such as home visitation and parenting classes
- Increasing family literacy

# Prop. 10 - Facts at a Glance

## What is Prop. 10?

In November 1998, voters passed the California Children and Families Act, an initiative that added a 50 cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs to promote early childhood development from prenatal to age 5. Last year, approximately \$687 million was collected from the tax.

Prop. 10 was designed to address the lack of public funding and support for early childhood development in the wake of a growing body of scientific evidence indicating the emotional, physical, social and developmental environment to which a child is exposed has a profound impact on his or her ability to succeed in school.

## How does it work?

Children and Family Commissions at the state level and in each of California's 58 counties are carrying out the work of the initiative.

The California Children and Families Commission (CCFC, or "State Commission") is the leadership agency and statewide coordinator for the California Children and Families Act. The CCFC provides oversight, training and assistance to the County Commissions and statewide education on the importance of early childhood development. In addition, 20 percent of the overall revenue is administered by the CCFC to offer technical assistance to County Commissions, to conduct research and evaluation on the best policies and practices for young children and to develop education, infrastructure and training programs for parents, child care providers and other professionals.

The bulk of the Prop. 10 funds, 80 percent, goes directly to the County Commissions. The County Commissions must develop

strategic plans consistent with CCFC guidelines on funding local child development programs and services, but they also have maximum flexibility in tailoring funding and programs to local needs. Some CCFC requirements for County Commissions include obtaining broad public input and submitting audits on spending to the CCFC.

Prop. 10 mandates that each Commission form at least one advisory committee to provide expertise and support. The State Commission has established an Advisory Committee on Diversity, charged with helping to ensure that statewide Prop. 10 programs meet the needs of California's ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse population and children with special needs and disabilities.

## How are Commissioners chosen?

The CCFC's member commission is comprised of seven members appointed by the Governor, the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate Rules Committee. The Secretary for Education and the Secretary of the Health and Human Services Agency (or their designees) also serve as ex-officio members.

Each county Board of Supervisors appoints a five to nine member Commission to include a member of the board of supervisors and two members from among the county health officer and those who manage county functions (e.g., behavioral health services, social services, or tobacco prevention and treatment services). The remaining members can be drawn from county functions or organizations that work in the early childhood development arena (e.g., child care resource or referral agencies, community-based organizations, school districts, and medical, pediatric, or obstetric associations). ■

## CALIFORNIA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMISSIONERS

**S. Kimberly Belshè**, a program director at The James Irvine Foundation and the former director of the California Department of Health and Human Services, brings to the Commission an extensive knowledge of California's health programs.

**Sandra Gutierrez**, an expert in the development of child care services, is currently the California project director for Child Care Programs at The Enterprise Foundation. Previously, she served as project coordinator for the Child Care Law Project.

**Karen Hill-Scott, Ed.D.**, is nationally known for her work in child care and development. President of her own children's television consulting firm, she is also a Co-Founder and Board Member of Crystal Stairs, Inc., and an Adjunct Professor of Planning at UCLA.

**Susan K. Lacey**, who served as a member of the Ventura County Board of Supervisors for 20 years, offers both a county perspective and, as a former special education teacher and School Board Trustee, an educational perspective to the Commission.

**Rob Reiner**, a filmmaker and activist for infants and young children, serves as the chair of the Commission after devoting substantial time and resources to the passage of Proposition 10 as part of his crusade to shift the national consciousness to value early childhood development.

**Louis A. Vismara, M.D.**, is a founding member of the M.I.N.D. Institute at the University of California, Davis. The interdisciplinary organization brings together researchers, clinicians, educators, parents and children to investigate and provide resources for a wide range of neurodevelopment disorders, from autism to learning disabilities. He also serves as a consultant to State Senator John Burton.

### Ex Officio Members:

**Kerry Mazzoni**, as Governor Davis' Secretary for Education, has appointed Assistant Secretary for Education Theresa Garcia to serve on the Commission in her place. Ms. Garcia brings a strong background in education issues and policy and program analysis to her post. She currently directs the Office's broad range of policy activities related to early childhood and K-12 education.

**Grantland Johnson**, as Governor Davis' Secretary for Health and Human Services, has appointed Ed Melia, M.D., M.P.H., to serve on the Commission in his place. Dr. Melia serves as the special assistant on children and youth issues at California's Health and Human Services Agency.

for all children. The passage of the California Children and Families Act (Prop. 10) a little over two years ago was one of the most significant movements in this direction. More recent evidence of this movement can be found in Governor Gray Davis' State of the State address, when he announced that he would form a School Readiness Task Force. This task force, which California Secretary of Education Kerry Mazzoni will lead in partnership with the State Prop. 10 Commission Chair, represents a historic opportunity to develop a public policy framework around school readiness. Additional evidence of this shift in public focus toward early childhood development is the inclusion of a school readiness component with the work of the Legislature's Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education (K through University), chaired by State Senator Dede Alpert. The California Children and Families Commission (CCFC, or "State Commission") has been asked to lead the coordination of incorporating school readiness recommendations into the Joint Committee's long-term education plan for the State.

The CCFC is pleased to play a role in these important leadership initiatives which offer the opportunity to make a significant change by developing a long-term public policy framework around school readiness and to integrate early childhood services into existing education, health, and social service systems. In this first issue of *Building Blocks*, a publication of the CCFC, we seek to engage concerned civic and social leaders and policy-makers as partners in the work of the Commission to ensure that early childhood development and school readiness become a sustained and integral part of our education, health care and family support systems.

In addition to the CCFC, which plays a statewide advocacy, programmatic, educational, and oversight role in implementing the California Children and Families Act, Prop. 10 created 58 local County Commissions, so that the majority of its funding could be directed to community priorities and needs. With this flexible framework in place, the State and County Commissions have begun to identify, establish and support programs and priorities designed to stimulate the creation of a comprehensive system of services for pregnant women and children up to age 5 and their parents and caregivers, all designed to support strong families, healthy children, and children learning and ready for school.

While the system of services that is ultimately developed will vary depending on each county's specific needs, funding priorities address the need for comprehensive prenatal-to-5 services linked to schools and designed to ensure children enter school ready to succeed. Although more research is needed to precisely define the most effective approaches, current research suggests that components of a comprehensive school-readiness strategy include:

- **High quality child care and learning centers**
- **Family support and parenting education**
- **Access to prenatal and early health care, including immunizations and screenings for children with developmental delays and disabilities**
- **Quality home visitation programs**
- **Early literacy and family literacy programs**
- **Smoking cessation for pregnant women and the elimination of secondhand smoke in a child's environment**

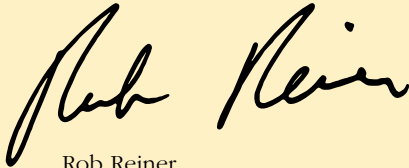




Throughout, a strong emphasis must be placed on making these services accessible at the community level through service delivery platforms such as resource centers for families and support programs that reach directly into schools and neighborhoods. Of course, the services must be inclusive with respect to language, cultural and ethnic diversity and attention given to children with disabilities and special needs.

Accomplishing these objectives will require the active involvement of all segments of our state, at every level and in every region. The CCFC and County Commissions can serve as catalysts in this process by focusing resources carefully, encouraging cooperative action and leveraging education, health, foundation and private sector funds to create lasting change.

We look forward to working together toward ensuring that every young child in California enters school ready to reach his or her full potential.



Rob Reiner  
Chair, California Children and Families Commission

## COUNTY COMMISSIONS

continued from page 12

In many of the NFLs, the elementary school districts have played an important leadership role, partnering with community-based organizations, parents, early childhood providers, local government agencies, libraries, hospitals and faith-based organizations to develop their plans. In Ojai, the first group to complete a plan and receive funding, key components of the NFL include developing community wide goals for children's development, providing preschool scholarships, offering parent education, and creating a mini-grant program to fund grassroots projects.

Commission Executive Director Claudia Harrison expects all seven regions to have completed their plans by September 2001.

For more information about the the Neighborhoods for Learning Initiative, please contact Claudia Harrison via e-mail at [charison@vcchildren.org](mailto:charison@vcchildren.org).

### **Pioneering Countywide School Readiness Survey Lays Groundwork for Action in Monterey County**

From the outset, school readiness was a key area of focus for the Monterey County Children and Families Commission. In their strategic planning process for Prop. 10, however, Commissioners realized they lacked a working definition of school readiness and a consistent assessment of the skills and behaviors of entering Monterey

County kindergartners. To get the information they needed, the Commission's school readiness team decided to tap the expertise of kindergarten teachers as educated observers of their young students and their families through a survey asking them about their kindergartners' strengths and weaknesses as they first enter school. Distributed in February of 2000 through an intensive countywide effort, the survey was designed to be brief and clear, and was supported by every superintendent in the county and by most private school principals as well. Ninety percent of kindergarten teachers in 81 public and private schools responded, providing views on 5,740 children who entered kindergarten in the county in 1999-2000.

According to Commission Executive Director Sal Castillo, the survey confirmed the range and prevalence of children's needs and where those needs were concentrated geographically, thus providing a statistical foundation for the Commission's work and establishing an essential baseline against which to measure future progress. The findings were also of great interest to district superintendents, who asked that district-specific reports be prepared to aid them in their own planning efforts. The Commission provided individ-

ual reports to each of 14 districts with more than two kindergarten classes, including comparison data.

In response to survey findings showing particularly high needs in the Salinas area, the Commission has committed Prop. 10 funds to two new programs designed to improve Salinas children's and families' readiness for school. "Voices and Choices" provides expanded center-based preschool and home-based parent-child education in conjunction with the Salinas Unified School District, adding two additional teachers to existing Head Start and state preschool programs, expanding Quick Start programs for entering kindergartners who have not participated in preschool, providing weekly home visits from parent liaisons, and offering screening and assessments for children with special health needs. "Beginnings: A Village for Family Learning" is a newly built family resource center at an adult school. Designed to house integrated services, the center includes a new pre-k classroom, an early childhood resource center, a parent center offering the Parents as Teachers program and parent education classes, co-location of Early Start and Peaks and Valleys services, and two public health nurses for the First Time Mothers program. ■

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